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ABSTRACT

This curriculum project, using research and literary and historical perspectives, seeks to help students develop an awareness of the rich cultural diversity of Mexico through studying the mythology of the Aztec people. Through literature and storytelling, students see how mythology is often about real people and events and woven into the fabric of a culture. The aim is to instill in students a reverence for the past with an appreciation for the customs and traditions that continue into the 20th century. The project discusses original sources available to recount Aztec mythology and then traces the historical background of the Aztecs. It details many diverse Aztec legends and creation beliefs. The project concludes that the Aztec myths are part of the cultural legacy that the Mexican people of today have inherited. Contains 16 notes, 9 sources, and 12 children's literature selections. (BT)

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Mythology and Legend in the Aztec World

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Quetzalcóat: (*Codex B. rbonicus* 22)

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Research Paper:

Myth and Legend
of the Aztecs
Fulbright-Hays Program
Aline Shapiro
July '99

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Mythology and Legend In The Aztec World

Rational:

From an historical and literary perspective, I will develop an awareness in my students of the rich, cultural diversity of Mexico through the mythology and legends of the Aztec People. Students will explore the elaborate mythological world of the Aztec culture to develop an appreciation for its complex history and religious structure. Students will understand the beliefs and customs that that are reflected in the daily life of Aztec society. Significant events and other indigenous cultures from the preclassic period to the present will be studied in order to understand the influence they have had on the peoples of Mesoamerica.

Through literature and storytelling, students will see how mythology is often about real people and events and woven into the fabric of a culture. I hope to instill in my students a reverence for the past with an appreciation for the customs and traditions that continue into the twentieth century.

Alphonso Caso,in his book, The Aztecs: Peoples of the the Sun, says what he thinks causes the human mind to believe and worship mythological gods. This is crucial to the foundation of Aztec society:

"...fear and hope are the parents of the gods. Man, confronting nature, which frightens and overwhelms him, sensing his own inadequacy before forces that he neither understands or is able to control but whose evil or propitious effects he suffers, projects his wonder, his fright, and his fear beyond himself, and since he can neither understand or command, he fears and loves, he worships." 1

steals the corn, while in another legend, Quetzalcoatl transforms himself into a red ant. In this context, they were able to learn about the the mythological god, Quetzalcoatl.

On the other hand, older students, after reading the myth, Musicians of the Sun, studied the Aztec creation myth of The Five Suns representing the eras of the world. They studied the four previous suns, their destructions and how each relates to a particular god and race of people. They then learned about the present sun, Nahui Ollin, or 4 motion. After studying creation myths from various cultures, they will write their own creation myths.

What original sources are available to recount Aztec Mythology?

Pre-hispanic screenfold books, called Codices are an essential source for anthropolgists to study the mythology of the Aztecs. These are native screenfold books formed of strips of pounded bark paper or deerhide. Intricate scenes and pictographs are painted with brilliant colors. The books that I used to research this paper have illustrations and quotes taken directly from these Codices.

It is unfortunate that only eighteen of these manuscripts have survived in their original form. Among them are the Codex Mendoza, The Codex Ramirez, and The Codex Boturini.

During the Colonial Period, friars from the Franciscan, Augustinian and Dominican Orders had the opportunity to consult with Aztec elders and study Nahuatl, the Aztec language. Particularly, the writings of Bernadino de Sahagún, Juan de Torquemada, Bartolome de las Casas are among the most important studies of pre-hispanic culture. These priests had great admiration for the Aztec civilization, but also considered their religious practices uncivilized.

Bernardino de Sahagun arrived in Mexico in 1529. He spent most of his life studying the Aztec language and culture. His most significant document is *La Historia general de las cosas de nueva España*. These books are

considered the most comprehensive work about pre-hispanic cultures. His work has been accurately recorded in both Spanish and Nahuatl.

In 1535 the first Spanish Bishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumarraga, confiscated and burned hundreds of pictorial manuscripts. These confiscated picture books were accounts of the legacies of Aztec education and medical knowledge, astronomy, history and cosmology. Only a few have survived.

Zumarraga at this time, also set up the Imperial College of the Holy Cross of Tlateloco, under the instruction of a few Franciscan friars. Sahagun was one these teachers. He collected the myths, legends and traditions of the Aztecs. He chose a select group of students who were trilingual in Nahauatl, Castilian and Latin, to do research with him and document the many aspects of Aztec life. Often these students listened and recorded the accounts of elders in the community.

In 1577, Philip II confiscated the bilingual works of Sahagun because of the growing attitude that the complete conversion of the Aztecs to Catholicism was highly unlikely. Sahagún's monumental work was not published until 1829, in Mexico. It is still one of the best sources available on the Aztecs.

Cultures of the Preclassic Period

The Olmecs:

The most ancient Mesoamerican civilization was that of the Olmecs. They emerged around 1200 BC when people first began to keep records of their gods and rulers. They were later described to Sahagun by the Aztecs as the 'Olmeca', the rubber people. This mysterious civilization existed in the Early Preclassic Period. A Nahuatl poem that was recorded after the Spanish conquest tells of the Olmec in this way:

in a certain era
which no one can reckon
which no one can remember
where there was a government
for a long time. 2

These people are known for their distinct jade sculptures of infants with jaguar-like features. They have been found in the jungles on the Gulf Coast. We have no written documents for this civilization. Their legendary land called Tamoanchan is a Mayan word meaning 'Land of Mist or Rain'. Michael Coe, in Mexico from the Olmecs to the Aztecs, presents several arguments suggesting the Olmecs have a connection to the Mayan civilization as well as a strong link to the Nahua language of Mixe-Zoquean.

There are three known, major Olmec sites; San Lorenzo, La Venta, and Laguna de los Cerros. In San Lorenzo, the first of these sites to survive, eight colossal statues were found. There is evidence that the basalt that they are made of needed to be quarried from boulders in the Tuxtla Mountains and then put on rafts, traveling up the Coatzacoalcos River for fifty miles, then dragged to the top of a plateau at San Lorenzo. The amount of work required is remarkable, not to mention the craftsmanship involved to create such artwork. it is believed that they are the representations of rulers, wearing helmuts to play ceremonial ballgame. A ballcourt has even been unearthed in San Lorenzo.

Because of the rich agricultural soil, these people were maize farmers. They also ate fish and domestic dog. There is also the evidence of some cannibalism amongst these people. The Olmec civilization in San Lorenzo was destroyed about 1200 BC and along with it the statues were brutally smashed. Then a new site was established at La Venta which is 18 miles from the Gulf Coast. A great pyramid was found in la Venta along with a ballcourt.It is estimated that as many as 18,000 people lived there. Then this center was also mysteriously destroyed around 400 to 300 BC. This was the largest Olmec site and it contains a wealth of artifacts, figurines, and colossal statues.

Early Zapotecs:

By 600 BC or possibly earlier, the Zapotec civilization arose in Oaxaca. The Zapotecs are probably responsible for inventing Mesoamerican writing. They may have also devised the first system for recording time. They recorded

their victories in a 260 day calendar. They recorded the names of their captives on buildings such as the Temple of Dancers at Monte Alban. They also built an observatory which confirms their knowledge of cosmology and astronomy.

Civilizations From The Classic Period:

The most remarkable period in all of Mesoamerica was from 150 to 900 AD. This is often referred to as the "Golden age of Mesoamerica", because all of Mesoamerica flourished during this time period.

A highlight of this period was the construction of the city, Teotihuacan. By 250 AD Teotihuacan flourished. The Pyramids of the Sun and Moon and Quetzalcoatl were built and there was evidence of religious practices covered on the walls of shrines and temples.

In later times, pilgrimages were made here by the Aztecs to see its ruins. There was a pantheon of gods and goddesses in both mural paintings and statues. Many of the Aztec deities were displayed here, as well. It is believed that Teotihuacan was a sacred burial ground. Ceramics from burials include unique pottery vases with three cylindrical feet, greenstone and jade masks.

Although the Totonacs claim they built this city, in truth, it is not really known who built it. Archaeologists believe that at its heighth it held 200,000 people. Teotihuacan was destroyed about 700 AD by unknown invaders. The palaces were ruined and the tempolesa was abandoned. In the outskirts of the city, semi-barbaric tribes continued to live for another two centuries.

After the destruction of Teotihuacan, there was a collapse of civilized life in most of central Mexico. Michel Coe states:

"...when Teotihuacan fell in the seventh century, the unifying force in Mesoamerica was gone, and with it interegional trade. The Late Classic saw increasing fractionalization, each culture moving along its own lines, effectively cut off from the other."

He goes on to say, "Perhaps agricultural collapse also had something to do with the Classic debacle, or the

pressure of outer barbarians to the north, who we know were then knocking at the gates of civilized Mexico. It is as if the pattern of Mesoamerican life, ...had become exhausted. Perhaps the weary farmers of Mexico...were no longer willing to build pyramids and palaces for leaders who failed to provide rains that would guarantee them full harvest." 4

Post Classic Era

Although there was warfare in the Classic culture of Teotihuacan, it was not until the Post Classic Period that there was great organization in the warfare structure of past groups. Warriors were professionally trained. There was even evidence of a larger organization of human sacrifice and there was fortification of small towns.

These internal conflicts in Mesoamerica were further heightened by the arrival of barbaric tribes in the northern outskirts . The Aztecs called these people Chichimecas, 'lineage of the dog'. They were hunters, forced into this lifestyle by the absence of fertile land or consistent rainfall. This led to their semi-nomadic life, living in caves and subsisting on wild fruits, seeds and small animals such as rabbits. Their ability to find adequate food to survive was a barometer for their peacefulness or desperate need to ravage other tribes.

The Toltecs were considered one of the four unifying forces in pre-Spanish history. They were partially made up of tribes such as the Chichimecas. The Nonoalcas, artisans from Puebla and the Gulf Coast, were part of this group and believed to build the monuments of Tula. Part of this new, organized group was the Uto-Aztrecans of Western Mexico. It is believed that this was probably the original Nahua group that founded the Toltec State. The first ruler of mythic proportions of these people was believed to be Mixcoatl.

There are many contradictory accounts of the events and rulers of this time. Michael Coe and other anthropologists support his belief that Mixcoatl and his people first settled in the Valley of Mexico in a place called Colhuacan. His son and heir, Topiltzin, was one of

the most famous people in Mexican history. He was born in 985 or 987 AD. He is often identified with the name 'Feathered Serpent' or 'Quetzalcoatl'.

Under Topiltzin's rule, the Toltec capital was transferred to Tula, 'Place of the Reeds'. It was believed that Tula was a place of great inner strife because Topiltzin was a peaceful ruler who didn't believe in human sacrifice. His enemies were the followers of Tezcatlipoca, 'Smoking Mirror'. Topiltzin was forced out of the city of Tula by Texcatlipoca.

Legend and history form the events in the downfall of Topiltzin and his Toltec followers: Texcatlipoca undermines Topiltzin by various evil strategies. First he comes to Topiltzin disquised as an old man making him drink a magic, poison potion. Next he appears naked in the marketplace wooing the ruler's daughter and who takes him as his son-in law. Then as a warrior he is chosen to lead a band of dwarfs in hopes they would be slain by the enemy. Finally, Texcatlipoca is stoned to death.

Atlast, according to legend, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl leaves his beloved city in exile after burning or burying all his treasures, preceded on his path by birds of precious feathers. As Tula disappears from his sight:

> 'Then fixes his eyes on Tula and in that moment
> begins to weep: as he weeps sobbing, it is like two
> torrents of hail trickling down:
> His tears slip down his face;
> His is tears drop by drop perforate the stones.' 5

According to Michael Coe, Tula, the Toltec Capital was occupied in approxiximately 950 AD to 1150 AD. by a population of 30,000 to 40,000. Excavation has uncovered an elaborate city with two pyramids and two ballcourts, a palace, a vestibule and a skull rack.It covered 5.4 square miles.

The destruction of Tula was thought to be a sudden cataclysmic event where the ceremonial hall swere burnt to the ground. Probably it was destroyed by the Chichimecas who were in the area and pushing towards cultivated lands.

The site of Alta Vista, near the town of

Calchihuites, Zacateca was rich in rare minerals. They were exported to Teotihuacan and processed to make artifacts. At some time during the Classical Period turquoise deposits were found in the American southwest by Pueblo farming cultures. It is interesting to note that a kind of Turquoise Road created an import/export trade route with the American Southwest and the Civilizations at tula. Possibly the Pueblo Indians needed the tropical bird feathers for their ceremonial rituals. The Toltecs may have traded for the green turquoise that they treasured so much.

The Post Classic Period:

The Mixtecs and Zapotecs:

Mixtec settlements were originally on hilltops in the mountainous region in western and northern Oaxaca. Each settlements was ruled by independent lords. There was often wars for the lands beyond the borders of these kingdoms. Through intermarriage in other groups such as the Zapotecs, they were able to take these into their dominion.By the time the Spaniards arrived, almost all the Zapoteca territory had been taken over by the Mixtecs. They were artisans of the finest gold and turquoise mosaics in Mexico. Although the Aztecs hoped to take over all the Mixtec territories, they were never fully conquered.

The Tarascans:

The Aztecs were unable to take over the Tarascans. Their terrritory was on Lake Patzcuaro in the western part of Mexico.The Aztecs called this territory, Michoacan, 'place of the masters of fish'. Their language was Purepecha. Although the people .were ethnically mixed, the rulers of this group were pure Tarascans. Tzintzuntzan was the capital when the Spaniards arrived in 1522. There is still much to be discovered archaologically in Michoacan.

Head of their kingdom was a king called a Kasonsi. He was the warlord and made all the top decisions. Under his rule were the heads of two other kingdoms, Ihuatzio and Patzcuaro and four boundary kings. A famous document

who had previously overtaken the town of Atzcapotzalco in 1230. They, too were a Nahuatl people. They were now powerful enough to take over all the city-states in the Valley.

In 1375, the Tepanecs gave the Aztec a Tlatoani, a Great Speaker. This was in contrast to the Aztec egalitarian society that previously existed. It must be noted that the Aztec society as well as the Tepanec kingdom had been greatly influenced by the Toltecs. Tezozomoc was head of the Tepanecs. He was also adept at empire building, a skill he had learned from the Toltecs.

In 1426, upon the death of Tezozomac, his son, Maxtlatzin, became ruler of the Tepanecs. He was an enemy of the Aztecs and decided that he would get rid of them. However,the Aztecs had become a significant power in the valley and they, too, had a new king, Itzcoatl, who was a strong ruler. His chief advisor, Tlacaelel, was considered a remarkable man.

In 1428, the Aztecs were able to conquer the Tepanecs and destroy their city, Atzcapotzalco.It was under the advisement of Tlcaelel for three successive reigns that his influence would make the Aztecs powerful and confident. Tlacaelel is responsible for instituting the "flowery wars", the practice of capturing enemies for the purpose of human sacrifice to the Aztec deities.

It is possible that much written history was destroyed at this time because Tlacaelco burned many records. He was responsible also for instilling in the Aztecs the belief that they were a 'chosen people' to take over all these smaller city-states and that they must feed the gods human hearts to keep the sun constantly moving across the sky.

Tlatelolco was also a key figure who instituted military control over these city-states. As Michael Coe states, Ahuitzotl,reigning from 1486 to 1502, as the seventh king of the Aztecs, was a mighty warrior who was able to "...conquer lands all the way to the Guatemalan border and brought under Aztec rule most of central Mexico. Probably for the first time since the downfall of tula, there was in Mexico a single empire as great as, or

greater than, that of the Toltecs." 6

During the reign of Ahuitzotl, the Great Temple at Tenochtitlan was built as well as an aquaduct which would bring water all the way from Coyoacan to the island capital. Ahuitzoltl's successor, Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin, who reigned from 1502 to 1520 was the most tragic figure of the Aztec Empire and under his rule the Aztec nation was destroyed by the Spanish.

The Destruction of the Aztec Nation:

In 1519, when the Spaniards, under the leadership of Hernan Cortes pushed their way into the Valley of Mexico, they came upon this civilization with wonder and amazement. Bernal Diaz del Castillo, a lieutenant of Cortes, wrote this impression of the city they were approaching:

During the morning, we arrived at a broad causeway and continued our march toward Iztapalapa, and when we saw so many cities and villages built into the water and other great towns on dry land and that straight and level causeway going toward Mexico, we were amazed and said that it was like the enchantments they tell us of in the legend of Amadis, on account of the great towers and cues and buildings rising from the water and built of masonry. And some of our soldiers even asked whether the things we saw were not a dream. 7

Upon entering the city, the Spaniards were brought to the Emperor Moctezuma, who appeared in regal splendor wearing intricate embroidery, decorated in gold jewelry with a headress of tropical bird feathers and beading. Servants and slaves, magnificent stone sculptures and treasures surrounded his court. Cortes' entrance into the city would become a symbolic moment that would lead to the downfall of this great civilization.

The Spaniards were welcomed as guests by Moctezuma. They stayed in the palace and were given feasts and gifts of gold and precious stones. Moctezuma thought that by making them welcome and bestowing them with gifts of gold,

they would leave his Empire as friends. He had no idea that the Spaniards were on a mission to confiscate territory while converting his people to Catholicism.

Motecuhzoma was nothing like Ahuitzotl. He was more of a philosopher than a King and often meditatedin a place of retreat known as the 'Black House". He believed that Cortes was actually the return of Quetzalcoatl who was predicted to come back from the east and conquer the Mexican people.

In fact, it was only after one week that Cortes imprisoned Motecuhzoma and his family, and forced the Aztecs to believe that Cortes was now in charge of the empire. It was only months later that during Cortes' absence from the city, that Spaniards massacred hundreds of unarmed Aztec dancers. On this same night, Motecuhzoma was stoned to death by his own people. The Aztecs retaliated against the Spanish by arming themselves with deadly clubs made out of obsidian, spears, bows and arrows. Thousands of soldiers drowned as the Aztecs destroyed the causeways. This battle came to be known as the *La Noche Triste, Night of Sorrows*.

Upon Cortes return, he enlisted the aid of other Indian groups in the area, to fight against the Aztec Empire. Disease, death and starvation swept over Tenochtitlan. For eighty days a bloody siege destroyed the Aztec Empire and two hundred and forty thousand Aztecs died. All their Temples were destroyed. All the valuable gold and treasures were either burned or taken to Spain including the codices.

Aztec Migration Legends:

Huitzilpochtli was the supreme god of the Aztecs. His geographical origin is unknown. According to legend, he led the Aztecs through many lands and for many generations. In the 12th century, *Huitzilpochtli* led them from their mythical home, Aztlan, 'place of whiteness or place of herons'. Ultimately,they were looking for 'an island with an eagle, sitting on a cactus, growing from a rock'. They were told by their priests that this would be the place that would become their home where they would

rule as masters of the earth. In 1345, after centuries of wandering, they finally settled in Lake Texcoco with the founding of Tenochtitlan.

A significant place in their wanderings during this migration was Chicomoztoc, known as 'Seven Caves'. According to Miller and Taube, in The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya, Chicomoztoc was the legendary origin for all Central Mexican people. 8

When a tree splits here, Huitzilpochtli leaves with only half of his followers. His sister, Malinalxochitl retains many of his followers. At Coatepec, "Hill of the Serpent", it may have been the place where legend and history merge. Huitzilpochtli is transformed into a cult deity and is also the ruler of the Aztec people.

In 1163, The Aztecs celebrated a New Fire Ceremony at Coatepec. There is a possibility that the Aztecs may have been responsible for the destruction of Tula.It was near Coatepec and it was destroyed right about the same time.9

How the mythological world of the Aztecs was organized:

In Mesoamerican thought, the cardinal directions represent a variety of elements from the natural and cultural world. One of the most important are world trees that are oriented to a specific direction. These trees represent the four-fold nature of a *single* world located at the center of the world.

The roots of this tree are fastened in the underworld, *Mictlan*, the Place of the Dead. There are nine levels in the underworld, where souls of the dead have to pass, before entering the lowest part of the underworld.

The trunk represents the middle world, the earth, which is separated into the four quarters. The branches reach to the upper world, the *celestial world*.

In the *celestial world* there are thirteen levels inhabited by a pantheon of gods and supernatural forces. The Aztec believe that all of creation is the result of the conflict between two opposing forces. There is an interdependence of these opposing forces evident

throughout the religions in the Mesoamerica. Oppositional pairings include day and night, sun and moon, fire and water.

In the Aztec world, the God of this Duality is *Ometeotl* who lives in the uppermost thirteenth heaven, *Omeyocan*. *Ometeotl* literally means 'two god'. This dual, bisexual god ruled over the highest heaven. *Ometeotl* is also referred to as the Lord and Lady of Sustenance, *Tonacatecuhtli and Tonacacihuatyl*.

Ometeotl has two children, *Quetzalcoatl* and *Texcatlipoca*. They are believed to have created the heavens and the earth. *Quetzalcoatl*, the plumed serpent, represents water and fertility. One of his aspects is to transform into the god of wind, *Ehecatl*, that which breaths life into living beings and also brings rain clouds. Texcatlipoca on the other hand, represents conflict. His name signifies Smoking Mirror.

The Aztecs believed that the gods and goddesses, of ruled one or more aspects of nature and were thought to control the cosmic balance. Human sacrifice grew out of the belief that by keeping these gods happy they would be able to keep the sun alive.

Because farming was the sustenance of their economy, they had many agricultural divinities. *Centeotl* was a corn god. *Tlaloc* was the god of rain and fertility.

It is important to note that many of the Aztec gods had been previously worshipped at Teotihuacan eight hundred years earlier. There is evidence that the Aztecs went to the great pyramids of Teotihuacan and dug up sacrificial objects to give as offerings to their gods at the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan. However, unlike the Aztecs, no human sacrifice existed at these other altars. These gentler gods at Teotihuacan were headed by *Tlaloc*, the rain god.

<u>The Aztec Belief of How The World Was Created:</u>

According to Aztec mythology, there were four previously existing worlds that had been destroyed. Each

of these worlds were called Suns. Each Sun was linked with either earth, wind, fire or water. The generally accepted order of the four suns are as follows:

The First Sun was called 4 Jaguar. *Texcatlipoca* became the First Sun. He is often portrayed as a great jaguar. In this first world, the people were thought to be giants. They were so strong that they could pull up trees with their bare hands. This Sun lasted for 676 years and it was destroyed by jaguars that devoured the people. This sun was called Nahui Ocelotl.

The creation of the Second Sun was ruled by *Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent*. The Second Sun was called Nahui Ehecatl or 4 Wind. During the Second Sun, humans were transformed into monkeys who lived in the trees and ate acorns. This world lasted for 364 years. The gods battled hurricanes and wind storms. The Second Sun was carried away by these winds.

The Third sun was Nahui Quiahuitl,4 Rain. *Tlaloc*, the god of rain, ruled over this creation. The people ate seeds and turned into dogs and turkeys. This world was destroyed by *Quetzalcoatl* with a rain of volcanic fire. And again, the world was destroyed.

Tlaloc's wife or sister, the goddess of water and streams, presided over the Fourth Sun. This time the world was inhabited by fish. The Fourth Sun, was called Nahui Atl, 4 Water. After 52 years, the heavens were destroyed by huge floods that swallowed everything. The heavens crashed down upon the earth. It is believed that we are presently living in the Fifth Sun called Nahui Ollin, or 4 Motion.

The Restoration of the Sky and Earth

Karl Taube in Myths and Legends, retells a myth from Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas:

The creator couples' four sons along with four other gods create four roads that lead to the center of the earth. This divides the earth into four quadrants. The eight gods then raise the heavens.

In this version of the myth, *Texcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl* become two trees that sustain the weight of the heavens. *Texcatlipoca* is represented by shiny mirrors

and *Quetzalcoatl* is represented by the plumed feathers of an emerald quetzal bird.*Tonacatecuhtli* repays them by making them rulers of the heavens and stars. The Milky Way is thought to be their pathway across the starry sky.

In another version of this myth, *Quetzalcoatl* and *Tezcatlipoca* create the heavens and earth by dismembering an earth monster. Karl Taube retells the myth from the Histoire de Mechique that describes *Tlateccuhtli* striding on the sea as a "toothy maw with gnashing mouths at her elbows, knees and other joints." *Quetzalcoatl* and *Tezcatlipoca* transform themselves into serpents and destroy *Tlatechutli*.

The other gods are angered by the slaying of *Tlatecuhtli*. To console the mutilated earth,they decree that all plants needed for human life will be derived from her body.

"From her hair are fashioned trees, flowers and herbs, and from her skin come the grasses and smaller flowers. Her eyes are the source of wells, springs and small caves; her mouth, great rivers and caverns; and her nose, mountain ridges and valleys. At times, the earth goddess can still be heard screaming in the night for the blood and hearts of people. Ultimately, only sacrificial flesh and blood can soothe and quiet Tlatecuhtli sufficiently to keep her producing the fruits needed for human life." 10

Creation of the Fifth Sun:

The Fifth Sun was called 4 Movement. It was thought to be created by *Tonatiuh*, the sun god. He was associated with the eagle and with the patron deity, *Huitzilpochtli*.

Karl Taube refers to the following myth from the Florentine Codex and the Leyenda de los soles: 11 All the gods gathered together to choose which one of them must be sacrificed to create the Fifth Sun. *Tecuciztecatl*, a haughty god, volunteers for this act.

The gods, however, elect *Nanahuatzin*, a more humble, yet diseased god. Some say he was the son of the *Plumed Serpent* named the *Scabby One*. He was thought to be a scapegoat by the other gods because he was so weak.

Tecuciztecatl is asked to jump into the flames to

create the Fifth Sun. Each time he attempts to jump, he he cannot do it.

Nanahuatzin stoically volunteers himself to be sacrificed first. It is only after *Nanahuatzin* has jumped into the flames and had four running starts of his own, that *Tecuciztecatl* is brave enough to join him.

The other gods wait patiently to see where the two gods will appear in the sky. *Nanahuatzin* rises in the sky and is thus called Tonatiuh, the firey sun god. But *Tecuciztecatl* also rises in the sky. The gods fear that there will be too much sunlight. One of the gods decides to throw a rabbit at the face of *Tecuciztecatl* to destroy his light.

Therefore, *Tecuciztecatl* becomes the dimmer light of the moon. The Mexican legend that suggests there is a rabbit in the moon's light when it is a full moon, is derived from this Myth.

After the two gods sacrifice themselves, the other gods believe that they must all sacrifice themselves to create the movement of the sun. Therefore, *Quetzalcoatl* cuts out the hearts of each of the gods. The Sun of Motion, *Nahui Ollin,* was created by this act.

The ritual of sacrifice in Aztec daily life was an on-going effort to appease the anger of the gods. Each time it became dark, the Aztecs feared that demons were roaming the earth. It was thought that the sun died at each sunset. The Aztecs believed that the sun's renewed strength was only produced by the blood of human sacrifice.

The Aztec Belief of the Origin of Human Life:

At the end of the Fourth Sun, the gods decided that one of them must go to the underworld, to retrieve the bones of their ancestors. *Quetzalcoatl* was chosen. He travels to the ninth layer of the underworld and asks the Lord of Mictlan for permission to take the bones of the ancestors. *Lord Mictlan* who is often described as a skeleton wearing a conical hat, tells *Quetzalcoatl* that he must pass certain tests to be allowed to take the bones.

First *Quetalcoatl* must travel around the underworld

four times while sounding his shell horn. *Quetzalcoatl* has to drill holes in the horn so that it can make sounds. He does this by using worms.

Then the Lord of Mictlan instructs his guards not to let *Quetzalcoatl* take the bones. *Lord Mictlan* digs a pit so that *Quetzalcoatl* trips and falls. However, *Quetzalcoatl* does manage to escape with the bones.

While traveling back to the celestial world, *Quetzalcoatl* drops the bones. They break into many pieces. The Aztecs believe that this is what causes human beings to come in many sizes.

Quetzalcoatl travels to Tamoanchan and gives the bones to *Cihuacoatl*, the Serpent Woman. She grinds the bones into a paste and places them in her sacred jar. Blood is then poured over the bones. This is believed to be the beginning of the creation of human life.

The Origin of Maize:

Aztec life revolved around the planting and harvesting of maize. *Tlaloc* was the most revered god of fertility and rain. He lived on the top of Mount Tonacatepetl, the Mountain of Sustenance. Clouds emerging from caves were the fertilizer of the land.

The gods were hungry and go looking for food to feed their people. *Quetzalcoatl* spies a red ant carrying maize on his back. *He* asks the ant where he got the maize, but the ant refuses to tell him where he got it.

Finally, after much bullying, the Ant agrees to take *Quetzalcoatl* to the Mountain of Sustenance. *Quetzalcoatl* transforms himself into a black ant so he can squeeze through a tiny tunnel where the seed and grain is stored. He carries some kernels to Tamoanchan. The gods mash the grain and feed it to the infants. *Quetzalcoatl* returns to the Mountain of Sustenance and tries to throw a rope around the mountain to carry it back to Tamoanchan, but it is too heavy. *Nanahuatzin* breaks open the rock. It is *Tlaloc* who carries back the seeds of corn to the gods.

Tlaloc has a female counterpart known as *Chalchiuhtlicue*, goddess of lake and running water. Tlalocan was the most desired places of afterlife. There

was thought to be no suffering in Tlalocan and an abundance of food. If you drowned or were struck by lightning you were assured a place in Tlalocan in your afterlife.

Birth of Huitzilopochtli, Hummingbird of the South:

Many accounts of this myth describe the birth of *Huitzilpochotli* taking place on Serpent Mountain, near the ancient city of Tula.

Lady of the Skirt of Serpents, *Coatlicue*, was the mother of *Huitzilpochtli*. She is engaged in holy work sweeping the area in front of the Temple. It is here that she finds a tiny ball of irredescent hummingbird feathers. They feel warm to her, as though they came from the sun. Admiring the beautiful colors, she picks them up and places them in her waistband for safekeeping.

Later, *Coatlicue* looks for the feathers but cannot find them. She also realizes that she has been impregnated. But she already has other children.

Cal Roy, in the book, The Serpent and the Sun,Myths of the Mexican World, describes the events that happen, in the following way:

The child to come already has a grown sister, the moon, "a great temperamental girl whose cheeks were strangely tatooed with golden bells". There were four hundred brothers as well, who were grown warriors.

These were the four hundred brothers known as *Centzon Huitznahua*. They are infuriated at their mother for being pregnant and they insist on knowing who the father is. Their elder sister, *Coyolxuahqui* decides that they must slay their mother for her bretrayal of having another child. *Coatlicue* hears of their plan. She is terrified for the life of her child.

One of the four hundred brothers goes to warn *Coatlicue* of the plan. But the child within her womb, *Huitzilpochtli*, consoles her and assures her that he is ready to fight a battle for his mother.

When the raging children come to their mother, *Huitzilpochtli* was "...fully armed, springing forth like an eager young warrior. On his tiny arm he carried a

shield of eagle feathers as bright as the sun and in one plump hand he impatiently balances a turquoise dart thrower and darts of blue. Fine glossy feathers float from his headdress and his left leg is covered in hummingbird feathers. Yellow stripes streak his face while his arms and thighs are painted the color of the noonday sky."10

Huitzlipochtli kills *Coyolxuahqui*, cutting her into pieces that fall to the base of Coatepec. In Cal Roys retelling of this myth, it is the brother that is commanded to slay three hundred and ninety nine brothers with his dart thrower called Fire Serpent. Only a few of the brothers get away. "...the the child, *Huitzilpochtli*, went about stripping the fallen and collecting the scattered arms of the defeated. He shouted jubilantly,

I am Huitzilpochtli, the young warrior,
Hummingbird of the South,
Not in vain do I wear yellow feathers,
For it is I who make the sun rise!
There at the wall of the region that burns,
Plumes appear. The war cry is heard!
I am called the Defender of Men. 12

Cal Roy says that *Huitzilpochtli* is the defender against the evils of darkness. The souls of warriors who died fighting on the earth and the prisoners who died on the altar of sacrifice went to the sky to fight at his side. After their dutiful service they were turned into hummingbirds and released to drink flowers in the House of the Sun.

Aztec Mythology of Life After Death:

The Aztecs had the highest regard for their warriors and those that died at the sacrificial altar. For these souls, the Aztecs believed that they entered Tonatiuhichan, "the house of the sun". These warriors and sacrificial beings accompanied the sun on its passage in the sky from east to west. They would bathe in constant pleasure and delight, sipping the nectar of sweet smelling flowers. After four years,they would return to the earth as hummingbirds or birds with exotic plumage. In *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España,II*, Bernard Sahagún

wrote:

The ancient ones said that the Sun calls them unto him so that they can live there in the sky with him, so that they can gladden his heart and sing in his presence and give him pleasure...and this way of meeting deAth is much desired by many, and many envy those who so died and for that reason desire this death, since those who so die are held in great esteem. 13

Women who died during childbirth went to the western paradise called, Cinalco, "the house of corn". This correlated to the western part of the sky where the sun set. They were considered female warriors. They would return to earth in the night as frightful phantoms and haunted crossroads to steal children, cause seizures or insanity.These women were depicted as having clawed hands and feet. According to Alfonso Caso, such a woman had magical powers and Aztec warriors tried to steal their right arm because it was believed it could make them invincible. 14

Tlalocan was the paradise in the south where people who drowned or had any death related to water went to rest. it was also a place of fertility where beans, corn and fruit trees dwelled. It was considered a place with luscious springs where one would live eternal happiness in song and game playing. It was also a place where cripples and dwarves would receive eternal bliss. The concept of Tlaloc was one that was also conceived by the Teotihuacans.

Those not fortunate to go to "the house of the sun", or Tlaloc went to Mictlan, thew Underworld which lies in the north. They needed to undergo a series of nine trials. Alfonso Caso lists the nine trials as follows;

In the first place, in order to reach Mictlan, the dead must cross a deep river, the Chignahuapan, which was the first of the trials to which the gods of the underworld subjected them. Thus a tawny haired dog was buried with the dead, so that it could help its master cross the river. In the second realm, the soul had to pass between two mountains that were joined together; in the

third, it must climb over a mountain of obsidian; in the fourth, the soul was subjected to any icy wind, so bitter that it cut like obsidian knives; in the fifth realm, the soul must pass through a place where flags waved; in the sixth, it was pierced by arrows; in the seventh hell were wild beasts that ate human hearts; in the eigth, the soul must pass over narrow paths between stones; and in the ninth and final hell, the Chignahumictlan, the souls found repose or disappeared forever. 15

Conclusion:

The Aztec truly believed that their life on earth was merely a transitory state. It was their religion seen through the eyes of their mythological gods that gave them sustenance, a desire to stoically live through their life on earth before having the possibility of attaining a better existence. We find this lament in their Nahuatl poetry:

We only came to sleep,
We only came to dream,
It is not true, no, it is not true
That we came to live on earth.

We are changed into the grass of springtime;
Our hearts will grow green again
And they will open their petals,
But our body is like a rose tree;
It puts forth flowers and then withers.

16

The Aztecs, as we have seen, are really a part of the many indigenous cultures that have evolved in Mesoamerica. Their myths are part of the magnificent cultural legacy that we are so fortunate to inherit. Their gods and goddesses give us the opportunity to reflect on our own sense of purpose in our own lives. They speak to us as an opportunity to live life its fullest.

I am greatful as a teacher, to have this opportunity to share the Aztec culture with my students. The Myths and Legends I have found in my research have already created an appreciation in my students for the rich and magnificent world of the Aztecs.

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